

New Media & Society

<http://nms.sagepub.com/>

'Blogs give regular people the chance to talk back': Rethinking 'professional' media hierarchies in new media

Erin A. Meyers

New Media Society 2012 14: 1022 originally published online 22 March 2012

DOI: 10.1177/1461444812439052

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://nms.sagepub.com/content/14/6/1022>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

Additional services and information for *New Media & Society* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://nms.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://nms.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

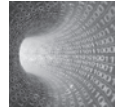
Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

>> [Version of Record](#) - Aug 21, 2012

[OnlineFirst Version of Record](#) - Mar 22, 2012

[What is This?](#)



'Blogs give regular people the chance to talk back': Rethinking 'professional' media hierarchies in new media

new media & society

14(6) 1022–1038

© The Author(s) 2012

Reprints and permission:

sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/1461444812439052

nms.sagepub.com



Erin A. Meyers

Oakland University, USA

Abstract

New media technologies have reshaped practices of production, distribution and consumption of media, in part, by blurring the lines of distinction between the role of producer and consumer of media. This shift has enabled the rise of a new class of 'audience/producer' that exists outside the traditional professional media producer class yet is increasingly threatening the professional's commercial position and ability to control the creation of content and the cultural production of meaning. This article examines the rise of the celebrity gossip blogger as an example of this sort of audience/producer intervention into an established media industry.

Keywords

audiences, blogs, celebrity culture, celebrity media, gossip, new media, media production

Introduction

Media in the twenty-first century are marked by the 'breaking down of barriers between traditional media industries and the telecommunications sector ... redefining the way music, film, radio, television, newspapers and books are produced, manufactured, distributed and consumed' (Burnett and Marshall, 2003: 1). It is not simply media texts themselves that have been reshaped, but the practices associated with the production and consumption of media. Marshall suggests that within new media:

Corresponding author:

Erin A. Meyers, Department of Communication & Journalism, Oakland University, 308A Wilson Hall, Rochester, MI 48309, USA

Email: emeyers@oakland.edu

the 'audience' member has become a producer of their content. In some instances, that action of producing is quite limited to just moving from website to website in a particularly individual and idiosyncratic way; in other cases, the user is actively transforming the content for redistribution. (Marshall, 2006: 638)

The advent of new interactive technological platforms like the internet did not create the active audience, but has made these practices visible and vital in ways that reconfigure audiences' role in media culture. In contrast to the traditional top-down hierarchy of commercial media in which professional producers or 'cultural elites' create and circulate content (and cultural meaning) for mass consumption by (passive) audiences, new media technologies have made visible an 'audience/producer' or what Bruns (2008) calls a 'produser' that exists outside this traditional professional media producer class and threatens its commercial and cultural dominance. The audience/producer engages in media production as a part of the pleasures of consumption, thus blurring the distinctions between audience and producer as a means to create a distinct form of textual production that draws on both roles. Audience/producers 'take advantage of new media technologies that enable them to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content' alongside (or at least in public conversation with) commercial media texts (Jenkins, 2006: 136). In this article, I examine the rise of the celebrity gossip blogger as an example of this sort of audience/producer intervention into an established commercial media industry. Using the internet, gossip bloggers have created a new 'professional' class of media producers whose existence outside of the traditional entertainment-media industry hierarchy destabilizes that system and the celebrity culture it helps produce. As a case study, these changes in the celebrity gossip media industry offer insight into larger questions about the shifting roles of audiences and producers within the broader new media landscape.

Audiences and/as producers

The notion that audiences do more than simply receive/consume mass media is a key shift in the development of contemporary cultural and media studies (Ang, 1985; Biocca, 1988; De Certeau, 1984; Jenkins, 1992; Morley, 1980; Radway, 1984). Rejecting a monolithic notion of the audience as a passive mass that simply consumes and accepts the bourgeois ideologies transmitted by mass media, these and other scholars acknowledge audiences are 'being active in all kinds of ways' when they engage with mass media (Morley, 1992). Though the range of what counts as 'active' consumption has been and continues to be called into question, this shift remains crucial because it recognizes that meaning is never completely fixed by the producer and arises from the socially situated relationship between text and reader. This acknowledges that audiences can resist the hegemonic closure of the text through active and critical consumption (Hall, 1980). In this view, audiences matter because how they interpret texts and what they do with those interpretations offer insight into how audiences produce cultural meaning through everyday media consumption.

Framing the audience as active is important to understanding the diversity of meanings that may be gleaned from media texts as well as how social contexts shape practices

of viewing. However, it is equally important to recognize that such active audience engagement does not necessarily strip the commercial media industry of its power to structure its 'preferred meanings' as the dominant ones (Hall, 1980). Furthermore, Morley (1992) argues, 'the power of viewers to reinterpret meanings is hardly equivalent to the discursive power of centralized media institutions to construct the texts which the viewer then interprets' (29–30). The centralized nature of the commercial media industry means the widespread public circulation of texts largely remains controlled by that industry. Though the notion of an active audience recognizes that one can resist the hegemonic ideologies that structure these commercial industry produced texts, the closed nature of mass media production means such resistance remains on the side of consumption rather than production of texts.

However, the industry's control over production and consumption is never absolute. Just as one cannot assume all audiences are passive, one must recognize that audiences have found ways to resist commercial media's control of meaning and of textual production in both private and public ways. For example, fans and fan cultures, as Jenkins (2006) argues, have always been 'the most active segment of the media audience, one that refuses to simply accept what they are given, but rather insists on the right to become full participants' (p. 131). Jenkins considers fans as an example of how audiences can play an active role in shaping public media culture. Fans are not simply consumers of texts; rather they use their consumption as a springboard for their own cultural production, creating a range of texts that enhance and extend their pleasure in the original text. These fan-created texts, such as slash fiction, not only challenge prescriptive definitions of audiences as consumers, but also explicitly disrupt the authority of official producers to act as the sole producers of texts. These fans, who are by no means representative of all forms of fandom, explicitly connect production of texts to the pleasures of consumption in ways not anticipated by earlier conceptions of the active audience.

Prior to the advent of the internet, this sort of audience production typically remained on the margins of official texts, offering a supplemental mode/site of engagement that relied on knowledge of the primary text and generally had only a small circulation. The commercial media institutions still maintained a large degree of control over what texts were publicly available. However, as Jenkins points out, new media technologies made fan-produced texts increasingly visible and viable by 'provid[ing] a new distribution channel for amateur production' that ruptures traditional media production hierarchies and increases the reach and relevance of fan-produced texts (2006: 131). This has extended the sort of cultural production typically associated with fandom into the everyday media consumption practices of new media audiences.

Though not typically associated with fan cultural production, I suggest the genre of celebrity gossip media provides a similar example of the technological and social impact of new media on professional media production hierarchies. Based in gossip talk, this media genre always relied, to some extent, on the participation of audiences in the production of meaning. Even in the often solitary practice of reading a celebrity gossip magazine, audiences are invited to use the codes of gossip talk to negotiate and judge the information presented in the magazine in an active process of meaning-making (Hermes, 1995). Historically, these practices remained invisible, as the producers of the magazines structured the limits of such meaning-making activities and there was no clear space for

readers to engage in such cultural production outside of their own personal spheres. That is, gossip readers produced meaning but did not typically produce their own publicly available texts. However, the rise of new media platforms shifted not only where audiences turn for the latest gossip, but also opened new spaces for audiences to create media texts based on their engagements with celebrity culture. Though not all online gossip is created by audiences, some of the most popular online gossip sites are part of a new breed of online, amateur/audience-produced celebrity gossip that elevates audience gossip and cultural production practices in ways that disrupt the traditional hierarchies of cultural production within celebrity culture – celebrity gossip blogs.

The rise of celebrity gossip blogs

The increased visibility of the audience/producer was aided by the development of a range of internet-based technologies that enabled the production of media texts outside of the traditional circuits of commercial media production. For example, the first free blogging software, Pitas, was released in 1999 and was followed in 2000 by Blogger (which was purchased by Google in 2003). These and other widely available and user-friendly blogging software products empowered gossip bloggers to create their own sites and define their own voices within celebrity culture outside of traditional media hierarchies. The genre grew quickly, with some of the gossip blogs even outpacing more conventional celebrity news sites in terms of popularity. For example, Perez Hilton began his eponymous blog in 2005 and it was among the top five most popular celebrity news sites by 2007, according to Nielsen NetRatings, beating out the online counterparts of top-selling celebrity magazines like *Us Weekly* and *In Touch* (Bausch, 2007). Though arguably not the first gossip blog, Perez Hilton.com may be the best known to casual observers, and its rapid ascension as a go-to source for celebrity-watching audiences heralded a shift in celebrity and media cultures. The gossip orientation of the genre and the user-friendly nature of the technology enabled the rise of a new category of celebrity gossip media that draws audiences based on gossip commentary, not simply celebrity news. That is, audiences were turning to gossip blogs not just for the latest on Britney Spears, but also for what Perez and other bloggers have to say about it.

Gossip blogs are rooted in the sort of gossip talk between individuals already a part of celebrity-watching audience practices. This positions bloggers outside of traditional conceptions of the ‘professional’ media industry producer, as no expertise or industry affiliation is needed to gain entrance to the blogosphere. The open nature of blogging means that anyone with access to a computer and something to say could, potentially, create a blog. Of course, not all celebrity-watching audiences engage in such visible production-oriented activities. Bird argues that equating all active audience practices with this type of public production assumes interactive technologies, not social practices, shape this new ‘active’ audience. She says that even within the new digital media culture, ‘it is very clear that the majority of people, whether by choice or access to time and resources, are not producers’ (2011: 504). The blurring of audience and producer characteristic of produsage offers a useful framework for understanding gossip blogs as a platform for a range of active audience practices, but does not assume all are the same. It recognizes that these visible forms of production come from below and move up into the realm of

professional production while retaining ties to both positions. That is, while not all active audiences are producers, the category of producer originates from the audience. While a few gossip bloggers have crossed over into the realm of 'professional' producers because their blogs are able to draw large enough audiences to attract the same sort of advertising that supports the commercial gossip media industry, their production practices remain tied to audience practices of remixing and reworking existing commercial media content in ways that reshape our understanding of 'professional' media production.

Methodology

Though it is difficult, if not impossible, to pinpoint the exact moment when blogs became a major force in celebrity gossip media, this article examines gossip blogs and their role in celebrity culture in the late 2000s, a moment when their impact was beginning to be felt across the celebrity media industry. As evidenced by *Time's* declaration of 'You' as the Person of the Year in 2006, the mid-to-late 2000s were an important moment of transition within the media industry when amateur producers and active audiences were redefining media culture. 'You,' as *Time* points out, are using new media to create and share content in ways that foreground collaboration and community as key strategies of media engagement (Grossman, 2006). It is no longer about *what* you read as an audience member, but *how* you engage with and reshape that text through the technological and social affordances of new media. Celebrity gossip blogs take full advantage of the technological and social possibilities of new media and highlight the changing roles of audiences within new media culture.

In order to investigate the complexities of the audience/producer position central to gossip blogging, I interviewed several popular gossip bloggers during this moment of transition within media culture, including Trent Vanegas of Pink is the New Blog (www.pinkisthenewblog.com), Molly Goodson of PopSugar (www.popsugar.com), Anna Holmes of Jezebel (www.jezebel.com), Natasha Eubanks of The Young, Black and Fabulous (www.theybf.com) and Brendon of What Would Tyler Durden Do? (www.wtdd.com).¹ The interviews, conducted from 2007 to 2008, focused on open-ended questions that allowed each blogger to address the process of writing gossip blogs, and his/her approach to celebrity culture and perspective on the blogger's role in shaping that culture. These bloggers were chosen based on the popularity of their blogs and for the range of ideological perspectives and approaches to celebrity culture that characterize each blog. In addition to these oral interviews, my analysis also draws from popular press interviews with Perez Hilton of PerezHilton.com (www.perezhilton.com), who declined to be directly interviewed for this project. His blog is one of the most frequently visited, profitable and well-known celebrity gossip sites on the web, and I argue it must be included in any discussion of the genre's potential to disrupt commercial media production hierarchies. His popularity and influence on celebrity culture ensured that I was able to compile an archive of popular press interviews in which Perez discusses his role in celebrity culture and celebrity media in ways similar to the oral interviews I conducted.

All of the blogs discussed in this article emerged as examples of the variety of approaches within the gossip blog genre that are able to draw audiences (and advertising dollars) large enough to disrupt print magazines' commercial dominance. All the sites,

even more niche-market sites like black celebrity gossip blog *The Young, Black and Fabulous* (YBF), regularly appear in web traffic tracker Technorati's list of Top 100 Celebrity and Entertainment blogs. Additionally, I consider these bloggers as 'professional' because they work full time on their blogs and earn most, if not all, of their personal income from that work. At the time of the interviews, several of the bloggers (Natasha, Trent and Perez) owned their blogs outright, and the remaining bloggers earned salaries as writers for blogs under the umbrella of larger online media networks. Using new media technologies, these bloggers have carved out a space for a distinct professional media production that retains ties to audience practices by foregrounding the personal and subjective perspective of the blogger as the core of the content.

The circuit of celebrity production

In order to understand how bloggers' media production destabilizes existing media production hierarchies, it is necessary to first define the commercial media's traditional role in celebrity culture. The system of celebrity production has historically been fraught with tensions between various players invested in the construction and circulation of the celebrity image within popular culture. Rojek (2001) argues 'no celebrity now acquires public recognition without the assistance of cultural intermediaries who operate to stage-manage celebrity presence in the eyes of the public' (p. 10). Stars do not simply emerge fully formed into public consciousness. They are carefully controlled commodities created by a range of cultural workers whose efforts are often invisible or at least hidden beneath claims of natural and authentic stardom. Gamson (1994) suggests these cultural intermediaries fall into three distinct but linked industries responsible for packaging, promoting and distributing the celebrity image to consumers: the independent celebrity producers, the entertainment institutions and the entertainment-news media (pp. 62–63). These are the traditional celebrity production 'professionals' who are responsible for crafting and controlling the public image and cultural meaning of the celebrity.

The 'independent celebrity producers' include workers like publicists, agents, managers and other specialists who build up the celebrity's attention-getting power as a means to sell that image to other commercial industries (Gamson, 1994: 61). The independent celebrity producers function as gatekeepers who control the access to the celebrity product, building up the perceived value of the celebrity as a commodity through authorized media appearances that promote name recognition, which are in turn 'cashed in ... for jobs' with the second category of celebrity industry workers – the 'entertainment institutions,' such as film studios, television networks, record labels and so on (Gamson, 1994: 62–63). Though talent and ability are tied to performance-related jobs, the entertainment industries are ultimately concerned with the celebrity's power to draw an audience. Therefore, both the independent celebrity producers and entertainment institutions rely heavily on the third industry – the entertainment-news media – to circulate this controlled version of the celebrity to audiences.

The entertainment-news media are responsible for publicizing this constructed celebrity image in order to maintain the attention-getting capacity that is key to the celebrity's continued presence in public consciousness and viability as a commodity in all spaces of production. The entertainment-news media are linked with both the independent

producers and the entertainment institutions, but this symbiotic relationship is marked by a constant struggle for control over the celebrity commodity and its cultural meaning. Gamson (1994) claims:

to be competitive, media organizations need access not only to the celebrity image but to unmined pieces of the celebrity personality. For this, they must on some level fight the publicist and the celebrity. They face the dilemma, then, of fighting those on whom their work activities and livelihoods depend. (p. 94)

The entertainment-media institutions must choose sides, 'either resisting or giving in to the bids by others to control coverage' (Gamson, 1994: 95). Entertainment-media outlets like *Entertainment Tonight*, *Vanity Fair* or *People* gain a certain level of legitimacy by giving in to such control. In exchange for playing by the rules set out by the independent celebrity producers, for example limiting interview questions to certain approved topics or allowing the publicist to choose the reporter/interviewer, entertainment-media outlets are given more direct – yet still controlled – access to the celebrity. This is not to suggest these 'legitimate' outlets are purely mouthpieces for the other producers. Even when playing by the rules of the system, the entertainment-news media maintain a certain level of power in terms of circulation of the celebrity image. Without these outlets, the specific inflection of the celebrity so carefully produced by and through the other workers would lack the necessary public visibility media provide. The entertainment-news media can thus use their own power and aura of legitimacy as leverage for greater flexibility in promoting a particular celebrity image. By working together, these three players attempt to close the system of production in an attempt to secure a unified celebrity image whose popularity benefits all points on the circuit.

Breaking the circuit: Autonomous outliers

However, those who resist this system are not without their own power. Gamson notes 'autonomous outliers' like tabloid or gossip magazines such as *Us Weekly* or *Star* may lose direct access to the celebrity by resisting the independent producers' attempts at control, but nevertheless play an important role in the production and circulation of the celebrity image in the public consciousness. They are autonomous because 'their commercial interests do not coincide with those of the publicity operations' (Gamson, 1994: 95). They do not generally promote the professional projects of the celebrity, focusing almost exclusively on the supposedly 'true' details of his or her private (read: uncontrolled and unstaged) life. While the autonomous outliers like tabloids do exist outside the more controlled celebrity production system, their interests remain articulated to that system. They need stars to emerge from that system in order to cover them. Nevertheless, it is precisely the perception of their outsider status that makes tabloids appealing to audiences because it allows them to break down the façade so carefully constructed by the other producers and uncover the 'real' person behind the glamorous star. By revealing the star in her 'unguarded' moments, tabloids play a central role in supporting the illusion of intimacy and authenticity that defines the celebrity/audience relationship in contemporary culture.

As amateur producers, bloggers exist outside the boundaries and control of this system, but are having an increasingly profound impact on the way it operates. Gossip blogs draw the form and style of tabloids by privileging the unauthorized and gossip-oriented details of the celebrity's private life over a discussion of public performances. Similarly, their unauthorized access to celebrities threatens the controlled construction of the star image while simultaneously increasing the visibility of the star to an ever expanding online audience. But celebrity gossip blogs go even further into the realm of the autonomous outlier by distancing themselves not only from the celebrity industry but also from the professional media industry more generally by highlighting their amateur status and approaching celebrity from the audience/fan perspective that foregrounds the blogger's gossip commentary and personal thoughts about a particular celebrity over a more distanced reporting of news about that celebrity. Paradoxically, blogs still rely on the entertainment-news media for content. This makes the blogger a unique player within the system of celebrity production who is simultaneously a consumer and creator of content. This blurring of the line between producer and audience is central to their intervention into the traditional celebrity media industry and the creation of a unique position as a professional producer within the new media landscape.

Gossip blogs as celebrity media texts

Journalism and blog content

Despite their excessive nature, Bird (1992) suggests, 'the history of tabloids is one strand in the broader history of journalism' (p. 9). They may push at the limits, but print tabloids remain rooted in conventional journalistic practices of newsgathering and reporting. In particular, though tabloids moralize and sensationalize their subjects, their stories remain tied to the journalistic concept of objectivity in which 'the facts speak for themselves, whether the facts are observed by a reporter or quotes from sources' (Bird, 1992: 17). Tabloid journalists distance themselves from the story and allow the readers to draw their own conclusions based on the facts, however dubious their provenance, presented. One key way bloggers create their unique professional position is by explicitly distancing themselves from these practices. By approaching celebrity as an audience/producer who consumes and comments on the celebrity image with no attempt to be neutral or objective, bloggers adopt a standpoint of commentator instead of journalist. Molly of PopSugar makes a distinction between the work of blogging and tabloid journalism:

[Tabloids] definitely have to watch what they write and who they write about. That's part of the game ... Which is just not something that, at this point, most blogs deal with [because] they're just, you know, commentary. [Bloggers] are not really making the stories. But they're reporting *about* stories that are in [tabloids like] *Page Six* ... I'm definitely more about commenting on photos or commenting on stories that are first hand reported elsewhere. (Molly, 2007, personal interview, emphasis mine)

Bloggers are not journalists in pursuit of a story, tracking down and vetting original sources or dealing with independent producers for legitimate access to the star. Nor are

they concerned with adhering to the journalistic standards of distanced objectivity and fact checking that characterizes the writing style of news media, including most celebrity tabloids. Instead, they take already published information from other sources and comment upon it, providing a link back to the original story or using a photograph as a springboard for their discussion of and, importantly, gossip about the latest information for their readers. Celebrity gossip blogs can thus be understood as reactive and interpretive approaches to celebrity culture that highlight audience meaning-making practices, specifically gossip, in the production of publicly circulated media texts.

Though blogs present a challenge to the continued dominance of the traditional celebrity media industry, they could not exist in their current form without these sources of celebrity news and gossip as a starting point. In order to produce their blogs, the blogger initially engages with celebrity culture as an audience member by consuming what the traditional celebrity media industry makes available and then producing his or her own texts based upon his or her reading of the latest celebrity news. In his discussion of how he gets information for his blog, Brendon from *What Would Tyler Durden Do?* (WWTDD) addresses the primacy of existing sources to blogs in general:

... me and everyone else [who blogs about celebrities] just has Google alerts set up for every celebrity you can imagine ... I have about, say, 25 things that I check all day, every day. Like *People* and *Us* and *OK* and the English tabloids and the New York tabloids and of course TMZ and all that stuff. And whatever's interesting, I try [to incorporate in my posts]. (Brendon, 2008, personal interview)

This practice stems from traditional newsgathering practices of tracking developing stories on news subscription services like The Associated Press, but bloggers generally link to their mainstream media sources without permission or subscription. Furthermore, bloggers typically do not simply repost the stories gathered from other sources. As gossip-based sites, they use the information gathered as a springboard for the production of their own unique online texts that draw from, but extend, the content of these sources.

The bloggers' ability to produce gossip texts begins with consumption of traditional celebrity media, but is not meant to directly mimic or reproduce the style or approach of those sources they consult. Trent of *Pink Is the New Blog* (PITNB) suggests retaining his role as an audience member is central to creating content for his blog because it allows him to emphasize his own viewpoints:

I don't consider myself to be an originator of information ... I'm more of a commentator or a watcher ... I have a group of sites that I, you know, news sites and gossipy sites and message boards where people are talking about stuff. And I'll just say this is where the story comes from and I'll post a site if I use it. And then I just give my two cents. (Trent, 2008, personal interview)

In fact, all of the bloggers in my sample frame their work in this way, emphatically stating that the work they do is not journalism because they react to and talk about celebrity stories rather than break or even simply report them. Even Perez, who occasionally claims exclusive and breaking stories, rejects the objectivity and fact-checking characteristic of traditional celebrity media in favor of commentary:

Do I really think [teenage pop singer] Miley [Cyrus] is a slut? No. But I am going to call her one because it's fun! I don't claim to be objective. I don't really believe everything I write. What I write is an exaggeration of what I believe. It's heightened reality. I write a lot of things just to piss people off or get a laugh. I'm not *The New York Times*. I'm Perez Hilton. (as quoted in Denizet-Lewis, 2009: 3)

Even though they are doing professional work, and, some may argue, a form of journalism in their editorializing, the bloggers simply do not see their work as connected to any sort of traditional journalistic practice. They see their media production as outside the boundaries of professional journalism because they are tied to the pleasures of gossip they experience as audience members. At the same time, the blogger is not a typical audience member. He or she occupies a more official position in terms of shaping the meaning of the celebrity covered because of the public platform offered by the blog and the size of the audience he or she draws. In this sense, the blogger acts as a mouthpiece for larger audience segments that read celebrity through a similar ideological lens, making audience meanings a part of the public circulation of the celebrity image in ways that disrupt the control exerted by the players in the traditional circuit of celebrity production.

That these bloggers do not see themselves as journalists is not surprising, as few had any experience working within any facet of the professional media industry before starting their blogs. The only bloggers from my sample with any prior journalistic experience are Anna, who worked for print media outlets *Star* and *InStyle* before becoming the editor-in-chief for Jezebel (a role she left in 2010 to pursue other writing projects) and Perez, who worked at *Star* at the same time he started an early version of his gossip blog, called PageSixSixSix.com (Anna, 2008, personal interview; Denizet-Lewis, 2009). Despite her journalistic background, Anna still makes a distinction between the two forms, seeing blogs as platforms for:

what the writer is personally feeling. Like if they have a very, very strong opinion about something, they're going to insert themselves and their opinion much more than if they were just, you know, announcing that something had happened. (Anna, 2008, personal interview)

As editor-in-chief of Jezebel, she assigns stories to certain writers because a strong connection to a topic or celebrity, not the distanced objectivity characteristic of traditional journalism, will make a better blog post. Bloggers reject the label of journalist in part because it frees them from the more rigid standards of writing and fact-checking such a label implies and allows them to emphasize their own voice in a more conversational and gossip-oriented style not available in traditional media forms. Natasha from YBF sees this as an important difference between bloggers and traditional celebrity journalists:

I'm well aware of journalistic standards and the journalistic integrity and ethics standards that a journalist has to take. None of us in the blog world do that and so we don't really have the right to call ourselves journalists ... So I think that's the main difference between us and the gossip tabloids. They're more journalists. I'm more saying what I feel like saying. We still need to have responsibility for what we say. But [even] if we didn't, we're not typically gonna get sued for it. (Natasha, 2008, personal interview)

Unlike print tabloid reporters, bloggers are not expected to be objective and neutral in their engagement with celebrity culture. The blogger explicitly uses first person gossip, a form of engagement more associated with practices of reading celebrity gossip, to create a new media text by drawing on existing content but reshaping them through his or her ideological perspective. The internet provides the tools to create and circulate this content, and by finding an audience and earning commercial support, these popular bloggers have entered the realm of professional celebrity media producers on their own terms. By elevating audience practices as a space of production, these bloggers challenge the notion that only official professional celebrity industry producers control the public meaning of celebrity culture.

Gossip and technology

The bloggers' perceived distance from professional journalistic practices is related to their use of the internet to create and circulate their texts. The technology of the internet enables information to be accessed and spread instantly, and bloggers must quickly comment upon the latest developments in order to stay relevant and popular. Thus, behind the blog's frequent updates and up-to-the-minute photos and details is a blogger whose workday is not defined by weekly publication deadlines in the way print magazines are. Brendon says:

... if I go three hours without checking my email I start freaking out. Because you never know what's going to happen. I remember the day that Britney [Spears] shaved her head. My girlfriend and I took [a night off]. Got home at like 11 at night, you know, and I had thousands of emails just saying 'Britney shaved her head! Britney shaved her head!' And so you don't ever want to miss ... you don't ever want to be last. I mean ... if something big happens ... you just have to be on it all the time. And, you know, on a lot of days when I don't feel like writing, like I'm not in a funny mood, or I had a fight with my girlfriend or whatever, I don't want to do this. No one cares. No one cares if it's a holiday. No one cares if I'm depressed. They just want the website. And I'm the only one here. It's just me. (Brendon, 2008, personal interview)

This perspective, echoed in similar ways by the other bloggers, reveals that the blog's audience is not necessarily relying on it solely for the latest information. Indeed, in Brendon's story, his audience *already knew* the latest gossip, but wanted to read what Brendon had to say about it, highlighting his role as a commentator, not a journalist breaking exclusive news, as the reason audiences visit his site. The immediacy of blogs is also relevant to their power to disrupt the traditional circuit of celebrity production. Perez acknowledges that the ability to update in such a frequent and timely matter is key to his success because it means he 'can react more quickly than print media ... It also means that publicists have less leverage because they have less time to control a negative story' (Day, 2007: para. 19). The immediacy of the blog format means he can offer the latest gossip faster and, he claims, with more accuracy than print outlets that must adhere to journalistic codes and print publishing schedules. Changing when and how audiences engage with celebrity culture has enabled blogs to quickly establish themselves as a strong force within celebrity culture.

In addition to shaping the content, the immediacy of the internet also shapes how and where bloggers do their work in ways that further distance them from traditional definitions of professional celebrity journalism. Since the internet can be accessed anywhere in the world, the reliance on online sources as starting points for their commentary means that gossip bloggers can keep their fingers on the pulse from anywhere and do not need the more direct access to celebrities that historically shaped the relationships between the independent producers and entertainment-news media. Unlike traditional celebrity media workers who rely on contacts with other players, bloggers do not have to be located in Los Angeles or New York City – the two centers of American celebrity culture – in order to have access to celebrity news and events. All the bloggers I interviewed are based in urban centers, but this was largely unrelated to their ability to access and comment on the latest celebrity gossip. In fact, several are located in areas not typically considered hubs of celebrity culture, namely San Francisco, Atlanta, and Alexandria, Virginia. Trent began PITNB in Detroit, Michigan, hardly a capital of celebrity culture, but was able to make it a success by commenting on information he found as a reader on the internet, not through journalistic investigation. Speaking of the early days of his blog, Trent recognizes that:

because I lived in Detroit ... I didn't have access to these parties, I didn't go to these premieres. So what I did was I basically ingested everything that was happening and I kind of put my spin on it ... And that's the only way I know how to do what I do is [through] my voice. (Trent, 2008, personal interview)

He has since moved to Los Angeles, but insists the move was not motivated by his work for the blog. It was the success of his blog that enabled him to afford the move, but he does not see it as changing the way in which he writes his blog or gathers his information. He still relies primarily on other online sources rather than cultivating relationships with publicists, mainstream entertainment-media sources or other players on the traditional circuit of celebrity production. The active audience practices that are at the heart of the blogger's professional work can be done from anywhere and do not rely on the interplay between producers that define the traditional circuit of celebrity production.

Gossip and 'putting yourself' in the blog

By distancing themselves from the journalistic constraints of traditional celebrity media and highlighting their roles as both audience members and producers, gossip bloggers build their content around the meaning-making possibilities of gossip talk. Celebrity gossip blogs are not simply compendiums of gossip items taken from other, more journalistic, sources, but a gossip talk style conversation about celebrity culture that foregrounds the blogger's voice and uses that talk to create a sense of connection between blogger and reader. The importance of personal voice or 'putting yourself' in your blog is echoed by several of the bloggers, who each stated that they write as if they were talking with their friends about celebrity culture instead of using the distanced and neutral tone characteristic of other journalistic forms. This again highlights the notion that they draw on their position as audience members/fans as well as producers in ways that celebrity journalists do not. According to Molly:

that's what makes blogs fun, and that's what makes people loyal to certain blogs and certain bloggers because you feel like you want to know what Molly feels about that or what Bill from Egotastic feels about that. So you actually feel like you know the person instead of just dry [reporting]. (Molly, 2007, personal interview)

This allows the blogger to inject his or her individual identity and worldview into the blog not only as a way to define the approach to celebrity culture, but also to make it more relatable and entertaining.

Brendon, like the other bloggers, points out that unlike journalistic approaches to celebrity, humor is central to gossip blogging. He says:

I don't pretend to be a reporter or anything like that. I don't pretend to have sources or like any of this is like I'm breaking some story. I'm just trying to write something funny and try to be entertaining and the stories are just the springboard, you know, something to base a joke on. (Brendon, 2008, personal interview)

However, he also blogs under a pseudonym and though he tries to write what he thinks is funny, he says, 'I don't want the page to be about me ... The page isn't supposed to be about me. It's supposed to be about celebrities and jokes and pictures' (Brendon, 2008, personal interview). This is very different from the other bloggers in my sample, who see their blog as an extension of themselves, but still prioritizes commentary over reporting. Brendon writes in a conversational and humorous style that foregrounds a mocking perspective on celebrity culture that permeates all aspects of his blog and draws in audiences who seek that sort of perspective on celebrity culture. The distance he cultivates is a personal, not objective, one. He still draws on his position as an audience member, not a celebrity insider, as a starting point for the creation of content on his blog.

This outsider status is important to the blogger's position within the system of celebrity production. By being both fans/audiences *and* professional producers, what bloggers say has resonance with readers and with the industry. Trent claims:

... in the 80s when the *National Enquirer* was the go-to tabloid for gossip, there was no feedback from the people. It was just fed to us. We heard from the *Enquirer* that Michael Jackson wanted to buy the Elephant Man's bones, and that was the end of it. And I'm thinking, why? Why would he ever want to do that? If I had a blog back then, I would have been like this is the stupidest thing I've ever heard! Like why would he ever want that? I feel like blogs give regular people the chance to talk back. And it's the talking back that [audiences] respond to. Because I'm not the only one who's thinking that, other people are thinking that as well. I feel like that's really where blogs fit in. It takes the tabloid journalism a step further ... when MTV is reading what people say about *The Hills*, do they care what *Us Weekly* says? No, because there are publicists to tell them what's going on, this is when the show is about ... Do they care about what a blogger would say? Absolutely. Because bloggers are their fans, their audience who is watching the show. (Trent, 2008, personal interview)

Bloggers act as mouthpieces for larger segments of the celebrity-watching audience, providing public visibility of the range of meanings that circulate around a celebrity's image. Furthermore, as Trent suggests, blogs, as publicly circulated texts created from

the audience perspective, have the ability to disrupt the controlled meaning of the celebrity in ways the industry can no longer ignore. Audience practices, while always a part of the circuit of celebrity production, are made increasingly important to the cultural meaning of celebrity in contemporary culture through celebrity gossip blogs.

As audience/producers, bloggers can also shed light on the needs of audiences that are typically ignored by mainstream celebrity media. For example, Natasha's decision to start YBF was a direct response to a lack of minority representation within mainstream media and, in fact, on other gossip blogs. She says:

... the only reason I started this was because I saw a need. Because I knew that if I'm craving it, there have to be a few other black chicks who crave it. At least a few. My job is not to do what I do to please mainstream media. (Natasha, 2008, personal interview)

YBF exclusively covers black celebrity culture, including celebrities from film, television, music and sports. Natasha also covers Latino or Asian-American celebrities, though less frequently than black celebrities. If a white celebrity appears at all, which itself is extremely rare, it is typically only in relation to a black celebrity or black celebrity event. This market niche may not be large enough for mass market print tabloids like *Us Weekly* to seriously pursue, but Natasha has built a popular and profitable blog based on addressing the desires of a particular audience segment that counts her as one of its members. This is an explicit move to increase the visibility of black celebrity culture, which she felt was being left out of 'mainstream' gossip media and, more importantly, to do so in a positive and affirming way.

Similarly, Jezebel provides a forum for celebrating the pleasures of celebrity culture, particularly through a focus on fashion and glamour. But Jezebel also openly critiques that culture and the celebrity media industry for promoting racist, sexist and heterosexist ideologies. The blog itself is not entirely devoted to celebrity culture, as it covers a range of political and popular culture issues through an explicitly feminist lens. However, celebrity content is among the most popular in terms of page views and number of reader comments, indicating there is an audience that wants an outlet for feminist approaches to celebrity culture. Like YBF, Jezebel defines itself against the hegemonic norms that permeate both the mainstream gossip media and mainstream gossip blogs. Anna says:

when I was thinking of what the site should be, and what I saw being marketed to young women, I wanted us to weigh in or at least acknowledge there is a large interest in celebrity stuff, but that it's often presented in a very sexist and misogynistic way on what I would call the gossip sites, whether that be Perez Hilton or any other number of popular ones. So the only way we would differentiate ourselves ... we would certainly weigh in on celebrity stuff and talk about it, but not by scrawling nasty things on pictures or making fun of the way a female celebrity looks in terms of her body. (Anna, 2008, personal interview)

Jezebel provides readers with the latest in celebrity news and gossip, but uses humor and mocking of celebrity culture to make larger arguments about the treatment of women in media and culture. The bloggers of Jezebel and YBF explicitly position themselves as alternatives to what they see as the problematic nature of mainstream gossip blogs. Their work as professional producers is explicitly tied to their experiences as audience

members and what kind of celebrity media they wanted to read. The other bloggers, though not as focused on addressing absences in mainstream celebrity media, also foreground their roles as fans/audiences, maintaining ties to that position as a key component of their role as a producer within the system of celebrity gossip media.

Towards a 'professional' audience/producer

The widespread availability of new media technologies and the ease of their use allow the blogger to enter into the circuit of celebrity production in unprecedented ways. They are not journalists nor do they work for any traditional commercial celebrity media outlet. Instead, they simply utilize the internet to start writing about celebrities and celebrity culture from the perspective of a fan/audience of that culture. The availability of these technologies opened the category of celebrity media to allow individuals who began as audience members to participate in the public construction and circulation of celebrity images. Furthermore, since bloggers cull their content from existing online sources rather than doing journalistic investigations themselves, they believe they are not beholden to any industry controls or journalistic standards. They approach celebrity culture from the position of a fan/audience member and have created a new category of celebrity media based not on traditional access to celebrities but on gossip-oriented commentary drawn from this position.

Even in the more open system of production offered by new media technologies like the internet, not all audience voices have the same authority, and the intervention of celebrity gossip bloggers does not herald the rise of an entirely new media system created by audiences. First, bloggers represent a very small percentage of celebrity media audiences, as consumption (though itself an active process) remains the predominant mode of audience engagement with celebrity media. Secondly, those bloggers who have achieved widespread success in no way represent the full range of possible interpretations of celebrity culture and many have built their success on the reproduction of the hegemonic values embodied by other forms of celebrity media. These blogs may challenge who can produce media texts, but use that intervention to reproduce the same dominant ideologies available across mass media forms. Nevertheless, as previously discussed, there is evidence that successful bloggers act as a public mouthpiece for certain audience segments and can use this as a challenge to hegemonic ideologies within celebrity culture, which remains an important intervention into mainstream media.

Furthermore, the blogger's attempts to disrupt commercial media hierarchies have not gone unanswered. Print tabloids and other forms of celebrity media have launched online portals that offer audience access to the latest celebrity gossip between print issues. These sites, such as www.usmagazine.com, www.intouchweekly.com or www.people.com are increasingly adopting the commentary-laden style of the gossip bloggers in an attempt re-assert their dominance in the genre. A textual comparison of these sites to the gossip blogs or other investigations of the ways the blogger's cultural production is shut down, copied or recuperated back into the traditional system of celebrity production is outside of the scope of this short article and is an important site for future research. In particular, since bloggers rely on these existing commercial gossip media as sources for their blog content, how do questions of copyright ownership shape the relationship

between bloggers and other commercial media outlets and the blogger's disruptive power? Do celebrities (and their handlers) look at blogs as an uncontrolled nuisance or a space where the celebrity image can be successfully managed under the guise of authentic (read: outside the established commercial media industry) access? These questions will shed additional light on the rise of gossip bloggers as a new category of media professional in the age of convergence culture and their continued impact on the commercial media system.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors

Note

1. After this initial introduction, I will refer to all the bloggers by their first names, reflecting the way they refer to themselves on their respective blogs, a move that, I argue, highlights the conversational writing style that ties gossip blogs to audience practices. All bloggers are referred to by the names they use on their blogs. As Brendon blogs only under his first name (which is itself a pseudonym), I refer to him only by that name throughout.

References

- Ang E (1985) *Watching Dallas*. London: Methuen.
- Bausch S (2007) Popular celebrity news sites grow 40 percent year over year, according to Nielsen//Netratings. Available at: www.nielsen-online.com/pr/pr_070329.pdf (accessed August 10, 2011).
- Biocca FA (1988) Opposing conceptions of the audience: The active and passive hemispheres of mass communication theory. In: Anderson JA (ed.) *Communication Yearbook*, vol. 11. Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 51–80.
- Bird SE (1992) *For Enquiring Minds: A Cultural Study of Supermarket Tabloids*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press.
- Bird SE (2011) Are we all producers now? *Cultural Studies* 25(4–5): 502–516.
- Bruns A (2008) *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, and Beyond: From Production to Producersage*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Burnett R and Marshall PD (2003) *Web Theory: An Introduction*. New York: Routledge.
- Day E (2007) Mr. Gossip steps into the real world. *The Observer*, 30 September. Available at: www.guardian.co.uk/media/2007/sep/30/digitalmedia.fashion (accessed October 3, 2007).
- De Certeau M (1984) *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Denizet-Lewis B (2009) The real Perez Hilton. *The Advocate*, 9 July. Available at: www.advocate.com/Arts_and_Entertainment/Internet/The_Real_Perez_Hilton/ (accessed July 17, 2009).
- Gamson J (1994) *Claims to Fame: Celebrity in Contemporary America*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Grossman L (2006) You – yes you – are TIME's person of the year. *Time*, 25 December. Available at: www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1570810,00.html (accessed August 10, 2011).
- Hall S (1980) Encoding/decoding in television discourse. In: Hall S, Hobson D, Lowe A and Willis P (eds) *Culture, Media, Language*. London: Hutchinson, 128–139.
- Hermes J (1995) *Reading Women's Magazines: An Analysis of Everyday Media Use*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

- Jenkins H (1992) *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. New York: Routledge.
- Jenkins H (2006) *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York: New York University Press.
- Marshall PD (2006) New media – new self: The changing power of celebrity. In: Marshall PD (ed.) *The Celebrity Culture Reader*. New York: Routledge, 634–644.
- Morley D (1980) *The Nationwide Audience*. London: British Film Institute.
- Morley D (1992) *Television, Audiences and Cultural Studies*. London: Routledge.
- Radway J (1984) *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Rojek C (2001) *Celebrity*. London: Reaktion Books.

Erin A. Meyers is Assistant Professor of Communication and Journalism at Oakland University. She received her PhD from the University of Massachusetts-Amherst in 2010. She is currently working on a book based on her research on celebrity gossip blogs and participatory culture, forthcoming from Peter Lang.